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1854

THE MARTYRS OF VIENNE AND LYONS.

A PRIZE POEM,

RECITED IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE 28, 1854.

BY

FREDERICK GEORGE LEE, S.C.L.,

OF S. EDMUND HALL.

OXFORD,
T. AND G. SHRIMPTON.
M DCCC LIV.

THE MARTYRS OF VIENNE AND LYONS.

"MARTYRUM VELUT AQUILÆ JUVENTUS RENOVABITUR; FLOREBUNT SICUT LILIUM IN CIVITATE DOMINI."

QUIVERING his golden shafts, the Sun reposed
On clouds of purple. Slowly from the East,
Mantled in sable garb,—upon her brow
A silver crescent caught the sun's last gleam,—
Evening came up; while stars and planets bright,
Like scattered jasmine flowers upon a stream,
Were clustering in the dark blue vault of Heaven.

Below, the Rhone went flashing on his way
Through tall banks perfumed with the breath of flowers,

While dews of evening hung a lustrous veil
O'er sun-tipt hills, like radiant gleams of light
That shed their halo round a sainted face.

And onwards still wound tortuous silver veins
Through rich green valleys, resonant at Morn
With notes of praise from birds of brightest hue
That quivered in the sunshine; as they hung
Beneath a sky,—one molten mass of gold!
Through valleys gay, at Noontide musical
With happy song from light and joyous hearts
That willing toiled in vineyards rich with fruit
Bright as the gardens of Hesperides.
Through valleys lone, when Evening's silent step
Fell on the earth; and now the nightingale
Sang out a plaint of clear and pensive tone,
Which, save the ripple of the swelling wave,
And the soft chiming of the vesper-bell,
Together blent in chords of harmony,
Was all the sound that met the listening ear.

But now 'twas Night,—calm, solemn, silent Night;
The moon, unearthly pale, went up the sky

Like a soul disenthralled from earth's embrace
Returning to its God. An awful calm
Was o'er the scene. Chaliced 'mid hoary hills,
A lake of blue, girded with silver line,
Mirrored the moon upon its tranquil breast,
With stars attendant,—angel-choristers
Around Heaven's great white Throne. Her softened ray
Made every tower and spire of fair Vienne
Appear a frosted ornament of light,—
A beauteous city of another world!

And here, amid this Paradisal scene,
Methought a slumber stole my senses o'er,
And I fell tranced in ecstacy. The breeze,
Softer than low lute stealing o'er a lake,
Made music not of earth.

One diamond star,
Brighter and brighter in Heaven's azure dome,
Appeared a jewel on an angel's brow,
Whose gold-fringed pinions, dyed with rainbow hues,
Cleaving the soft breeze of the midnight hour,
Were folded near. Divinely fair his face,

Such as a poet's dream alone can know,
Or an old painter's pencil could depict,—
And flashed with beams of brilliance from above.

By some mysterious influence I passed,
With rushing tumult in my fiery brain,
Swiftly through intermediate range of space,
And stood o'ershadowed by the olden town.
In calm repose it lay. The streets seemed broad:
One side was moonlit and the other black,
And no voice broke the awful silence round.
Heaven's guardian visitant with noiseless step,
Led me through ways where towering spires, cross-
crowned,
Shot up, like crocus-leaves through crystal snow;
While clearest tones of harmony divine,
Soft as the murmurs of the evening breeze
Through some sweet harp, fell on my raptured ear:
"Peace to the souls of all who sleep in Christ,
Whether o'ershadowed by the churchyard tower,
Or by the ocean's ever-changing waves;
And peace to those who, when the Church's step
Pacing unwearied down the track of Time

Had traversed scarce two little centuries,
Laid down their lives with Stephen and with James,
As living witnesses in GOD's behalf.
Seest thou yon spire with moonbeams silvered o'er,
Piercing the azure sky. Below, repose
The ashes of the martyr Attala;
Above whose tomb one never-ceasing song,
How he became a witness to the faith,
Exultant echoes through the solemn aisles!"

And now methought he ceased, and on we passed
By Pilate's tomb,—he who had doomed to death
The LORD of Heaven who hung the stars in space,
And bade them circling whirl till Time should end;
By Pilate's tomb,—whose soul, for ever gnawed,
Prometheus-like, by Memory's poisoned fangs,
I saw enchained within the bars of Hell.
At which a thrill, as lightning, through me passed,—
Dim was my sight, my senses petrified,
And my parched tongue refused its offices,—
The mind alone could frame an orison.
The angel, like a mortal, seemed to sigh,
And fell a tear transparent.

Onwards then
To where a jaggèd wall, moss-grown and black,
Rose darkling in the cold moon's snowy beams.
And here, a vision of the infant Church
Slowly unfolds before my trancèd sight,
Life not more tangible.

Tier upon tier,
Within a spacious amphitheatre
Uprising slantly to the sky above,
Ten thousand forms gathered within its walls,
With murmurs hoarse, like winds in leafless woods,
Borne round from lip to lip, rose to the sky:—
"Long live Aurelius, lord of lords, and king!"
Then, like the calm which, at the SAVIOUR'S word
Levelled the billows of Gennesareth,
A sudden silence overspread the scene,
As tones of lute and cithara arose;
While every eye, with strained and eager gaze,
Fell on a portal.

Slowly through its doors
A sad procession wound across the sand;

There was the aged sire, with hoary beard,
Grown old as messenger of GOD, the WORD,
To lands where Darkness spread her shadowy wing,
And Sin, with easy rule, was king supreme.
There, too, the virgin fair, whose tearful eye
Glanced, quick as thought, around the circling rings,
And fell in fear: and he who ministered
At GOD's Own Altar, when the faithful met
For Prayer, and Hymn, and Eucharistic rite,
Was gazing dauntless on the eager crowd,
While faltering words to JESUS moved his lips,
And clasping to his heart the SAVIOUR's sign,
Lowly he bowed, making GOD's will his own.

Greetings tumultuous, bounding upwards, rose,
Praises to gods, and curses doubly deep
On all the servants of the Nazarene.
Still, here and there, a woman's head would turn,
And taper fingers brush away a tear;
Or in youth's soul, passion and sympathy
Beget desires, and feelings kin to love
Excite to save the Virgin from her doom,
And claim her as his own.

But there was none—
Save He who watches o'er the meanest slave
As o'er the mightiest monarch—to look down,
And soothe His servants in that fearful hour.

The cruel rack, the slow-devouring flame,
The brazen plates, glowing with fiery heat,
Severed the tie that knit the flesh and soul;
And angels, hovering o'er that awful scene,
Sang lauds triumphant, as each martyred form,
One after other, each inspiring each,
With Death's dark imprint fell upon the sands.

One lingered still. The savage rack in vain
Had almost torn Blandina limb from limb;
The circling fire in vain had wreathed her form:
Heroic still, and fortified from Heaven,
Her tongue refused her Saviour to deny.
At which, malicious murmurs, rising round,
Deepened to frantic shouts to Jupiter,
To hurl annihilating lightning-darts
On stubborn Christians, and erase their name

From Memory's tablet, as the boisterous sea
Washes a sand-wreath from the golden shore.

Quivering, she stood erect, seeming to pray
That Death's dark shade might overshadow her,
And seraphs waft her weary soul to GOD.
Then angel-forms, leaving their courts on high,
Came down at His behest to strengthen her,
And on their rainbow-pinions bear her soul;
For life, like tide-waves, now slow ebbed away,
And her glazed eyes must soon be closed in death.

She stood, half-leaning, by a fire-charred stake;
Heavenward her deep-blue eye. The soldier-band
Fled the arena, and their star-tipt spears
Were clustering round another low dark door:
A silence such as mortals seldom know
Was over all. The shouts had died away,
And each could only hear his beating heart.

With demon-glaring eye, and ruffled mane,
Three tawny lions, bounding o'er the sands,
With silent step, and ready fang displayed,
Half leap upon the Virgin's mangled form.

With inward growl supprest, sudden as thought
They halt. Their fiery-flashing eyes grow dim,
And they stand motionless.

Quick as o'er face
Of some calm lake a windy ruffle sweeps,
So, on the features of those thousands round
Pale Fear his impress leaves.

The Son of God,
Guardian of those who owned not Babel's power,
Walked in the furnace, and its fury cooled:
And when His faithful captive seer was cast
By impious King to lions, shut their mouths
And stayed their hunger, that they harmed him not:
So now, at His command, an angel bright
Their power makes powerless; and they crouch in fear
Upon the sands, before that helpless form.
The ranks around—e'en as a sudden storm
Upon a summer's eve—hurl murmurs forth
Wild and discordant; while the soldiers mailed,
With cruel spear dye her pale breast in blood.
Then holy angels bear her soul to God.

All jubilant with praise, anthemnal sounds
Echo throughout the jasper courts above,
And bounding Heaven's wall, swell like a wave,
Circling and circling, to an emerald shore.

Then, as the panorama glided past,
Dark scenes of horror came. An aged Priest
Endured fierce torments, such as man alone
Could ne'er devise,—dark schemes, brought forth in hell,
And fondly nurtured in this world of sin.
There, pure as crystal waters, rippling forth
From some untrodden mountain's hoary steep,
A Virgin bore acutest agony,
And her soul went to rest in Paradise.

So to the end. But still methought the Church,
In power divine and majesty supreme,
Walked forth through lands, and nations heard Her voice,
Owning Her sway.

Then, signed with JESU's sign,
Ten thousand forms flocked to Her lowly ranks,—

Kings, nobles, poets, princes, senators,
Swelling Her triumph, as She walked erect
Across the desert of this sinful world;
And upward tuneful rose through starry space
Her songs of praise to GOD. The courts of Heaven
Swelled with the anthem, and the white-robed choirs,
Tuning their harps in unison, sang forth—
Back-echoing sweetly to the Church on earth—
Unceasing praises to the Crucified.
Onward, upon the margin of Time's stream,
Gazing, She saw the empires of the earth—
Dynasties old—fall, like rock-fragments hurled
Into the mighty chaos of the past.
Firm as eternal mountains still She stood,
Gazing serenely o'er the troubled world.
Her footstep moved, while broader grew Her ranks,
Even as a river widening to the sea.
Kings bowed before Her, and Her altars bright
Shone with rich jewels, as the ocean-waves
Gleam with a thousand glistening gems at night;
Her shrines were circled round with costly stones,
Sapphire and pearl, and violet amethyst.
Looms of the East, and cedars from the North,

Balm from the forest, incense from the groves,
And sweet flowers clustering on the breast of Earth,
Adorned the temples of the Saviour's Bride.
Her silver voice, resounding o'er the waves,
Westward and southward, called the nations home;
And they, responding, owned Her Queen, until
Climes that on Earth's far edge courted the sun,
Welcomed Her saving step, and echoing sent
Eternal alleluias up to God.

The spirit-armies of black-bannered Sin
Harassed Her borders as She passed along;
And still the World, owning Her sway divine,
Would, here and there, grow weary of Her rule;
And then the Martyrs won a branch of palm;
The Virgins, lily-wreaths and crowns of gold;
And the Confessors, Heaven's bright starry thrones!

Then slumbering souls, methought, in weird repose,
Within the flowery groves of Paradise,
Hearing the ripples of the Stream of Life,
And distant harpings round the eternal Throne,

Seeing bright gleams that flashed through golden
bars,
Outcried, in tones of sweetest agony,—
"LORD, good and merciful, how long? how long?"

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